

Observations on Butterflies at Hilton, Derbyshire, 1970-1976, and a day in Devon

By A. WM. SPEED*

During the six years I have lived at Hilton in South West Derbyshire, 10 miles to the west of Derby, I have only encountered 14 species of butterfly several of which are locally scarce. Consequently the majority of my collecting has been of moths. Whilst reading the various entomological journals on winter evenings armed only with a glass of sherry, I have been transported to many remote and notable haunts in the company of some eminent field lepidopterists. It has occurred to me that on many such journeys the hunting of rarities appears to be of paramount importance. But what is rarity?

One morning during June 1976, I was offered an opportunity to find out. The telephone rang. It was a long-standing friend Bryan Thomas of Crewe whom I had introduced to the pursuit of butterflies and moths some three years earlier. He informed me that he would be spending a holiday during early July at Budleigh Salterton in Devon, and said that if while he was there I would care to join him for a day he would meet me at Exeter St. Davids Railway Station. The spot he had in mind to visit was a forest some few miles to the north of Exeter. July 6th was decided upon. The only concern was the weather since I would need to set off in the early morning and conditions could deteriorate, but in this summer of summers the fear was to be unfounded.

The period between making the arrangement and the day of the trip was filled with thoughts of fritillaries and hairstreaks, gatekeepers and ringlets, rarities indeed to a Derbyshire lad.

The day dawned cool and clear and the excitement mounted during the car ride to the station. The train departed at 7.04 right on time. A coffee from the buffet and settle back to drink in both the coffee and the scenery. Even at this hour Meadow browns (*Maniola jurtina* L.) and unidentified Pierids were up and about, but then this was a day to make the most of. A change of trains at Birmingham and on we sped into the South West.

As the journey proceeded I became aware of an eerie difference in the ever changing scene through the carriage window. It was some time before the awful truth dawned. It was the elms. The elms standing in hedgerows and small groups. The elms stark against the horizon. Dead, lifeless. I thought of the communities which must have perished with them. Whole cities, teeming masses all dead. I then consoled myself by thoughts of the abundant supply of wood which was available for the woodboring insects, but it was small consolation set against the loss of these majestic trees. I had, of course, read about the spread of this awful elm disease,

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but I was ill prepared for the scene now presented since the disease had not yet reached Derbyshire.

The train ran along with my thoughts and the scene changed. The motorway builders were at work extending the M.5 far into Devon. Thoughts of future journeys by road, but no, they would not afford the same time for relaxation and day-dreaming and such thoughts were quickly dispelled. The train arrived in Exeter at 11.27, the timetable had said it would.

Bryan was there looking well tanned from his holiday which had thus far been spent in the pursuit of Grey mullet (*Mugil chelo* Cuvier) along the river estuaries of South Devon and butterflies. I understand that the prerequisites of mullet fishing include tide tables, therefore, with an accurate watch, a car and a map of the area, the pleasure can be extended by chasing the tides around the coast since mullet come in from the sea on the rising tides.

It was immediately obvious that Bryan was bubbling with enthusiasm about something and after a brief exchange of pleasantries I was whisked off to a location which I later discovered was Stoke Woods to be given an introduction to my first hairstreak (*Strymonidia w-album* L.) the white letter. We had only just entered the wood when we came upon a patch of bramble around which was a myriad of insects which included a good number of white-letter hairstreaks along with a Comma (*Polygonia c-album* L.) my first encounter with the Comma since seeing one in the middle of the English Channel on a Dover-Boulogne ferry in 1969.

I later learned that Bryan having time to spare awaiting my arrival had "discovered" this particular spot. I was entranced, two new species. I was persuaded to leave and we motored further northwards to a spot which Bryan had visited during the previous year. As we approached the spot a butterfly was seen gliding very gracefully along in front of the car. It was a flight I had not witnessed before, but was obviously that of a Nymphalid. But which? The flight continued apace, long glides punctuated by an occasional wing beat, a most serene tranquil motion. The insect was identified as *camilla* and I was immediately reminded that the closely related European species *Neptis sappho* Pallas and *Neptis rivularis* Scopoli are called Gliders. Most appropriate, though White Admiral has more charm at least to me.

We stopped the car just off the road in the entrance to a clearing. The sight I beheld was astonishing, and it was some minutes before the whole spectacle registered. It was now midday and the sun was very high and hot. The air was still and there was a quiet transcending beauty. The hedgerow to my right was overgrown with layer on layer of bramble in full bloom. Bacchus himself would surely have approved the banquet. Numerous Silver-washed fritillaries (*Argynnis*

paphia L.) were in attendance, a feast both for them and for me. Another guest was the Gatekeeper (*Pyronia tithonus* L.) also in numbers, which appeared to wink each time they settled as the underside eyespots were momentarily visible before falling to hide under the hindwings.

The central area of the clearing was very dry and parched as a result of the drought we had experienced, but rising from the baked earth were many thistles and these too were the subject of much attention, this time by predominantly Marbled whites (*Melanargia galathea* L.) with often as many as four vying for the nectar of one bloom. Just then a White Admiral appeared over the hedge to the right followed quickly by a second. The effect of this speciousness was numbing. I feared to speak lest I disturb the tranquility which pervaded. Derbyshire is never like this.

It was decided to take lunch before any excursion into the area of woodland surrounding the clearing was undertaken, so we made ourselves comfortable on a handy log and dined on cold chicken salad and dry cider. A gourmet's delight! Well, the butterflies appeared to be suitably impressed since several endeavoured to share our meal, unless of course it was mere curiosity as to the nature of the two intruders into their world.

Bryan suggested he take me along a path leading from the clearing to a spot where had seen White Admirals on his previous visit. So off we set. It was difficult to follow the flight of a single insect as others passed in and out of vision so swiftly causing a constant distraction. Photography was also difficult not because of the lack of a subject willing to pose, but because others wanted to join in for family portraits. It was during this time that I met yet another newcomer the Ringlet (*Aphantopus hyperanthus* L.) again present in good numbers. The spot where the White Admirals were found was an idyllic place, almost magical. A deep cutting flanked by the ubiquitous brambles. Honeysuckle appeared to wind gently around everything. The trees on the far side of the gully cast a welcoming shade and we took shelter from the fierce heat for a while and watched the grace of the *camillas* gliding on so effortlessly to and fro, in and out of the shade, never still. The contrast with the Skippers (*Ochlodes venata* Bremer and Grey) darting rapidly about in human fashion, with what seemed little purpose, was marked. If only we could conduct our affairs with the grace and pace of the Nymphalids.

With such peace and quiet the time was obviously racing by and in order to send me on my return journey fortified, Bryan returned to the car to prepare a snack, and I was left in solitude. On returning to the car two more species came to notice, singletons of both the Brimstone (*Gonepteryx rhamni* L.) and the Dark green fritillary (*Mesoacidalia aglaia* L.). Tea was taken and we departed feeling a strange mixture of pleasure and sadness.

On the train back to Derby I had plenty of time to pause and reflect. An exceptionally enjoyable day? Certainly. Rarities? Well, compared with my local list for Hilton, yes. And memories? Memories to last a lifetime. Days such as these are rare indeed.

Butterflies observed at Hilton, Derbyshire, 1970-1976

HESPERIDAE. *Ochlodes venata* (B. & G.). Several each year 1970-76, although appears to be becoming scarce throughout Derbyshire.

PIERIDAE. *Gonepteryx rhamni* (L.). 9.viii.75 (1), 20.iv.76 (1), 31.v.76 (1); becoming more widespread in Derbyshire. *Pieris brassicae* (L.). Common. *P. rapae* (L.). Very common. *P. napi* (L.). Very common. *Anthocharis cardamines* (L.). Common.

LYCAENIDAE. *Lycaena phlaeas* (L.). Common. *Polyommatus icarus* (Rottemburg). A strong colony at Hilton nature reserve.

NYMPHALIDAE. *Vanessa atalanta* (L.). Scarce most years; not recorded in 1974. *V. cardui* (L.). Rare. 15.viii.76 (2). *Aglais urticae* (L.). Very common. *Inachis io* (L.). Several seen most years.

SATYRIDAE. *Lasiommata megera* (L.). Common. *Maniola jurtina* (L.). Abundant.

LOZOPERA BEATRICELLA WALSINGHAM IN DERBYSHIRE AND YORKSHIRE IN 1976. — I was very interested in the letter concerning *Lozopera beatricella* Wals., in Vol. 89, No. 3 of *The Entomologist's Record*, for this species also turned up during 1976, for the first time so far as I am aware, in the counties of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. A specimen was taken in a Rothamsted light-trap at Matlock, Derbyshire, on the 27th June, and the Yorkshire specimen was taken at a light-trap operated by Mr. H. E. Beaumont at West Melton, near Rotherham. Both of these specimens have been examined by Dr. J. D. Bradley who has confirmed their identity. It seems strange that such an attractive little moth should have escaped the attention of local entomologists in previous years and I suspect that this species may be a newcomer to the region.

Also taken in the Matlock trap on the 25th August, was a single specimen of *Agriphila latistria latistria* Haw. This species was discovered for the first time in Derbyshire during 1975 at Shipley Park, near Heanor, where it is reasonably well established to judge from the numbers attracted to light in both 1975 and 1976.

A number of colonies of *Stenoptilia saxifragae* Fletcher are now known to occur in Derbyshire. Two sites exist in gardens at Matlock, another in a garden at Starkholmes, near Matlock, and a colony in my own garden which was established in 1972 by introducing specimens from the first local colony discovered at Sheffield in 1971. — F. HARRISON, 24 Church Street, Holloway, nr. Matlock, Derbyshire.